Critical control points in the delivery of improved animal welfare

J Webster

Old Sock Cottage, Mudford Sock, Yeovil BA22 8EA, UK; email: john.webster@bris.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper describes the implementation and simultaneous promotion of an action plan designed to ensure animal welfare standards on-farm that exceed the requirements for acceptability in law. The approach is based on two action cycles, the producer and retailer cycles. The producer cycle, involving welfare audit and the implementation of an action plan for welfare has four stages: self-assessment; independent audit; creation of an action plan based on identification of principal hazards and critical control points; review; and revision of the action plan depending upon assessment of outcomes. The retailer cycle is designed to set quality standards for animal welfare, demonstrate compliance, promote proven high welfare products and reward producers. The paper reviews some incentives and constraints to action for both farmers and retailers and presents encouraging examples of the extent to which both producers and retailers have responded to increased public demand for high welfare products.

Keywords: animal welfare, farmer motivation and reward, quality assurance, self-assessment, Virtuous Bicycle, Welfare quality®

Introduction

Increasing public demand for high standards of farm animal welfare and quality assurance (QA) in matters of farm animal welfare has stimulated the development of a number of QA schemes that are based on independent audit of farm standards and increasingly well-founded in science and humanity — at least in theory. In practice, however, there is, as yet, little evidence that QA schemes are operating as well as they might either at ‘farm’ or ‘fork’ level, which is disappointing for consumers, farmers and the animals themselves. Complaints from farmers, who are presented with direct welfare issues on a daily basis, include ‘too much inspection, too little action, too little reward, too few signs of improvement’. Consumers (a very heterogeneous population) vary greatly in their concerns for farm animal welfare, the value they place on their concerns (the price they are willing to pay), the extent to which their concerns are reinforced by information (of varying provenance and quality) and finally, the extent to which their concepts of good animal welfare match those of the animals themselves. Those directly involved in the business of animal husbandry, whether farmers, researchers, advisors or administrators of the law and welfare have a primary duty to promote good welfare standards for as many animals as possible. For this to happen, both producers and consumers must be encouraged to examine and adapt their patterns of behaviour. This paper develops the concept of a protocol, the ‘Virtuous Bicycle’ (Webster 2009), for the parallel delivery of improved animal welfare on the farm and increased consumer demand for high welfare food within the supermarket, shop or restaurant. It reviews the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats attached to the implementation of this protocol and proposes ways to address them. Finally, it examines, by way of examples, the progress we have made so far and offers some promising prospects for the future.

What is animal welfare?

The aim of the exercise is to promote improved standards of farm animal welfare both in the minds of the consumers (because that is what sells) and in the minds of the animals themselves (because that is what matters). The first step is to define clearly what is meant by animal welfare as perceived by the animals themselves. There is now broad agreement amongst academics and real people that the welfare of a sentient animal is defined by how well it feels; how well it is able to cope with the physical and emotional challenges to which it is exposed. We recognise that circumstances can shift welfare state in both directions: either towards positive welfare, where the animal is ‘healthy and happy’ or in a negative direction of increased environmental challenge towards a state of suffering where the animal is unable to cope, or has great difficulty in coping, because the challenges are too severe, too complex or too prolonged (Fraser & Broom 1990; Webster 2005).